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AUTHOR Aronson, Anne
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ABSTRACT

A study examined how a group of non-traditional students approached the issue of multiple identities, i.e., those identities of gender, race, culture, ethnicity, region, nation, class, sexual orientation and so on that made up each individual self. In-depth interviews with eight returning adult women attending a Catholic women's college in the midwest explored principally the women's histories as writers, but also their lives as students, daughters, partners, workers, etc. Comments from three study participants illustrate the two major patterns in how participants' multiple identities affected them as writers. In the first pattern, women who feel alienated or estranged from one or more of their identities or have difficulty living with the tension created by conflicting identities, tend to see themselves as less empowered writers. In the second pattern, women who are able to juggle, negotiate, and/or integrate their multiple and conflicted identities tend to experience themselves as writers who can move about with ease and confidence among many discourses and writing situations. They are what sociologist Patricia Hill Collins calls "outsiders within," writers who see their conflicting identities as an opportunity rather than a barrier to voice. Ideally, classrooms provide students like these with places where they can sort through their identities--places which respond positively to the rhetorical and discursive ruptures which may result as they affirm their plural selves. (SR)

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Anne Aronson

Outsiders Within: Identity Conflicts in Non-Traditional Student Writers

Just want to note that despite the session title, this paper does not pay much attention to composition classrooms per se; it addresses student writing in a more general sense.

Many writing teachers and researchers have in recent years paid a great deal of attention to the conflicts between students' home cultures and academic culture. Patricia Bizzell explains these tensions as conflicts between world views; David Bartholomae explains them as conflicts between discourse communities; and Robert Brooke explains them in terms of role conflict. These scholars are concerned with what students gain and lose when they become immersed in value systems, language practices, and social roles that in many ways contradict their previous experiences with literacy.

The rise of multicultural curricula in recent years has also forced the issue of cultural conflict; what happens in a classroom where cultural differences abound not only between and among students and teachers but also within the individual student? How do students manage, or fail to manage, the multiple identities they bring into the classroom? How do their multiple and sometimes conflicting identities affect them as writers? This paper reports on a study of how a group of non-traditional students approach the issue of multiple identities. My study

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featured in-depth interviews with eight returning adult women attending a Catholic women's college in the midwest. The eight study participants were diverse, and included women from both low-income and middle-income backgrounds; African American, Mexican American, and white women; lesbian, bisexual and heterosexual women; and women with and without learning disabilities. I questioned study participants principally about their histories as writers, but I also asked them about their lives as students, daughters, partners, workers, etc. My interviews suggest that reentry women tend to revisit their pasts frequently, bringing new knowledge and thinking skills to bear on their life histories. In doing so, they are confronted with the conflicts -- sometimes even the contradictions -- in their identities.

Before reporting on the results of this study, however, I'd like to explain briefly my own understanding of the rather mercurial term "Identity." When I started this project, I spent many months reading about and pondering the meaning of identity. I finally arrived at a rather simple heuristic for understanding the term. Imagine, for a moment, the demographic information forms that we all fill out regularly in applying for jobs, money, drivers' licenses, college, etc. The forms often ask us our sex, age, race/ethnicity, address, marital status, income, nation of birth; it may even ask us if we have ongoing or past medical conditions. As we fill out the form, this information seems to

be innocent grist for the bureaucratic mill. These categories, however, have huge social significance. On the one hand, many of them organize and give meaning to our lives; we glean some security from the knowledge that we are male or female, and we look to our regional, religious, and ethnic communities for shared beliefs and practices that give us a sense of pride and belonging. On the other hand, most of these categories drive prejudice, discrimination, and oppression; they are the categories which determine who has educational opportunities, who gets jobs, and whose names are scrawled hatefully on city walls. I call these categories "identities" -- gender identity, race and ethnic identity, regional and national identity, class identity, etc. In such a view, a person does not have a single identity, but rather multiple identities, which influence daily experiences of belonging and oppression in different ways.

Because we have many identities, we are plural, not singular. And within that plurality is tension, conflict, even contradiction. The most important of these conflicts is the conflict between identities that allow one to join the club, and identities that exclude one from the club. Sociologist Patricia Hill Collins talks about how her identity as a Black woman makes her an academic outsider, while her status as a credentialed sociologist, gives her many of the social and economic privileges reserved for insiders. She captures the contradiction of this positioning by calling herself the "outsider within." Collins says:

> Some outsiders within try to resolve the tension generated by their new status by leaving sociology and remaining sociological outsiders. Others choose to suppress their difference by striving to become bonafide "thinking as usual" sociological insiders. Both choices rob sociology of diversity and ultimately weaken the discipline. A third alternative is to conserve the tension of outsider within status by encouraging and institutionalizing outsider within ways of seeing (29).

Collins suggests that the outsider within paradox should not be resolved but exploited; in particular, the outsider within can develop "distinctive analyses of race, class, and gender," analyses that may be elusive to those who are automatically admitted to the club.

Gail Pheterson's study of alliance formation among groups of women of diverse identities provides another insight into how identity conflict can be turned into a stance of agency and resistance. Pheterson studied groups of women with polarized identities -- e.g., a group consisting of white women and Black women, a group consisting of heterosexual women and lesbians. The purpose of the groups was to "interrupt psychological processes which divide women from one another" (146). When the groups first began to meet, members who were in dominant social positions tended to feel guilty, confused, or detached with respect to the subordinate group. Members in the subordinate social positions tended to feel angry, isolated, and defiant. The group process in which feelings for self and others were examined in depth resulted in increased self-esteem and connectedness among oppressed individuals and an assumption of increased responsibility and accountability on the part of

privileged individuals. Pheterson argues that the process enabled the women to form alliances. She defines alliance as "knowledge of, respect for, and commitment between persons who are in essential ways different but whose interests are in essential ways akin" (149). She points out, however, that the phenomena she observes in her study occur not only between individuals, but within individuals who often hold contradictory identities. Her study suggests that a kind of alliance building can occur within the self. Such an intrapsychic alliance requires that one acknowledge the interrelatedness of all one's identities, and that one use one's conflicting identities for the purpose of resisting the very systems of dominance which create divided selves.

My study of returning adult students at a Catholic women's college indicates two major patterns in how participants' multiple identities affect them as writers. In the first pattern, women who feel alienated or estranged from one or more of their identities or have difficulty living with the tension created by conflicting identities, tend to see themselves as less empowered writers. In the second pattern, women who are able to juggle, negotiate, and/or integrate their multiple and conflicted identities tend to experience themselves as writers who can move about with ease and confidence among many discourses and writing situations. They are what Collins calls "outsiders within," writers who see their conflicting identities as an opportunity

rather than a barrier to voice.

To illustrate the first barrier -- conflicting identity as a barrier to writing -- I'd like to talk for a moment about Gloria, a participant in my study. Gloria is a Mexican American woman in her 50's who left school in 8th grade to help support her family. Almost thirty years later, she returned to college to pursue a degree in social work. Gloria feels out of place both in her identity as a Mexican American whose first language was Spanish, and in her identity as a woman who is married to an Anglo man, and who has spent most of her life in an Anglo suburban community. She says she experiences,

> a certain amount of alienation, because for the most part, say in this culture here or in Minneapolis, I have freinds and I feel like I'm accepted, but there are times when I feel like an outsider. . . But now, having lived here this long, when I go home I feel alienated from that culture also, even among my family. . . I am seen as not completely of their culture. So it's hard both ways.

Partly as a result of this bicultural alienation, Gloria struggles with writing in both languages. Afloat between two cultures, she feels she has no place from which to speak. She is deeply lacking in confidence as a writer of English, wondering if her inadequacies are due to her bilingualism, her lack of education as a child, or, as she puts it, that she's "simply not smart enough."

While Gloria is stymied as a writer by her multiple identities, other participants were empowered by identity conflict. Ginny, for example, is a white woman in her 30's who grew up in a small Southern working class community. She

experiences a conflict between her identity as a student at an urban, private college, and her identity as a small town working class person whose parents did not go to college. A poetry and fiction writer, Ginny describes how, in her writing, she makes the most of her dual identities as a college student from a blue collar background:

> There's this whole thing about coming from the background that I come from and being in college and wanting to appear intelligent and that sort of thing. And my writing voice is still very colloquial and it's hard for me to accept that that's O.K. and that my characters can say important things without college vocabulary. And it's hard for me to let them do that. . . . And there's part of me that is struggling to separate from that [my background] and part of me that still cherishes it so it's a tough struggle. . . . I guess I want to separate from the part that would keep me from being all that I can. That would be the rigid little boxes that we're put into and how a lot of the people in small towns don't ever try to push beyond. And they're so accepting of things and that's the part I'm struggling against. And swallowing whole all the advice and feelings that my family presented to me without ever questioning. But on the other hand there's a close family and the loyalties and that sort of thing, and the familiarity that comes from a small town that is very good. And I cherish that part.

Ginny's wonderful comments spin out a web in which conflicting identities are explored and evaluated. Her identity as a student in a private college gives her the freedom and capacity for critical thinking which were inaccessible to her as a child. On the other hand, her rural, working-class roots give her the values of loyalty, community, and groundedness in the concrete world which are uncommon in an urban, academic environment. In order to feel comfortable with both these identities, she has had to sort through them, picking out what is valuable in each.

The writing Ginny gave me as part of the study reflects this

sorting process. One piece of fiction entitled "Special Ex" is a gentle portrait of a waitress whose husband leaves her for a "ruffle" after 18 years. The story, suggests, I think the affection she has for working class struggles, particularly women's struggles. Another is a seven-line "short story" entitled, "What Will the Neighbors Think?" in which Ginny describes the mixed messages young girls were given about sex in the small town she grew up in. It reveals the feminist, critical eye Ginny now turns on her own past. The ability to identify with experiences of deprivation, and at the same time place those experiences in a social context, shapes Ginny's academic papers as well, for example a research paper she wrote on illiteracy.

Another particpant in my study, Rashida, provides a second example of how identity conflict can provide a source of empowerment for writing. Rashida is a Black woman in her early 30's who returned to school after several years in the military to pursue a double major in social work and psychology. Like Ginny, Rashida has sorted through her cultural affiliations, in this case her affiliations to both a Black and a white world. Like Gloria, she says that she sees herself as belonging to "neither world. I'm not what most people think of as a Black person, and yet there is no way that I can fit into white society either, so I'm kind of in the middle." Although Rashida is an outsider in both worlds, she is comfortable in both. Her conflicting identities spur rather than impede her creativity as a writer. She describes a story she wrote:

> The characters are kind of like, they're a lot like me. One of the women is like the ruling caste of the planet and the other is from the lower caste. They come together and that's kind of like two sides of me. You see, it's the part that's very comfortable with being the only black in whatever and O.K. with that and there's the other part of me that can get down and talk with sisters and just get all crazy.

For Rashida, dual identities and dual languages are enriching rather than limiting to her self and her writing.

Rashida is an outsider within. Her position of being at once outside and inside the dominant culture gives her an effective place from which to oppose systems of dominance. She has voiced that opposition in her academic writing, her fiction, and her non-fiction. She wrote, for example, an editorial for the college newspaper in which she analyzed white racism and called on the college community to take responsibility for eliminating intolerance: She says in this article: "You, as much as I, are victims of the effects of racism. No one is immune."

Rashida not only negotiates among her multiple identities, but also confronts conflicts <u>within</u> her own identity as a Black person. In one paper for a social work class, she wrote about a site visit to a welfare agency. Rashida explores how her family programmed her to feel disdain for Blacks who took "handouts" from whites: (I quote from her paper)

> I didn't want people to see me walk into that office. I would be just like <u>those</u> people. I'd be <u>another nigger</u> taking money from those who worked hard to get what they had. They would probably assume that I had lots of children at home. . . . I dressed too well, my clothes are not from the Salvation Army or some thrift store so I would probably spend all of the assistance money on new clothes every chance I got. The other "folks" in that office would just know that I was different from them (because my manner would

be very aloof when speaking to them) and they would resent me for it.

> I can see how internalized racism has me in its grip. It's like I couldn't see the white people, Asians, and Native Americans walking through those doors. I only saw the "lazy, good-for-nothing niggers" that my mother grandmother, and extended family seem to hate so much.

Rashida begins to demystify internalized racism -- what Freire identifies as the internalized oppressor -- by examining the conflicts within her own identity and personal history.

Ideally, our classrooms will provide students like Gloria, Ginny, and Rashida with places where they can sort through their identities, separating from parts of their pasts, and learning to cherish other parts. Ideally, our classrooms will sometimes invite students to create and recreate complex and discontinous selves in both written and spoken language, and will respond positively to the rhetorical and discursive ruptures which may result from these creations and recreations. Ideally, we will affirm identities which place students at risk within the dominant culture, so that Gloria and other students like her will find that they are affirmed, not rejected, as plural selves.

Anne Aronson
North Hennepin Community College
Brooklyn Park, Minnesota